

Beyond Subject Matter in Jewish Art

Subject matter - dictionary definition:

The essential facts or ideas that constitute the basis of representation.

The most common identification of Jewish Art is primarily through two basic qualities, a) something to do with Judaism derived from the title of the artwork, subject (matter) and or b) the religious/ethnic/cultural identification of the artist. The first, the title - usually identifying its subject (matter) like; 'Jews praying' or 'the Haggadah' or 'Moses descending from Mt Sinai' and such like. The second depends simply on the artist being Jewish, or defined by others as being Jewish.

Jewish subject (matter) – need not have any other Jewish qualities apart from the description of what is represented and need not be created by a Jewish artist. Jewish subject (matter) alone could be created by anyone who understands the theme, narrative, plot or characters at hand. This type of subject (matter) although Jewish by description, need not be created from a specifically Jewish perspective. It just relies upon the subject (matter) being designated as Jewish by description or cultural/religious connection. The understanding of such subject (matter) could be from a variety of sources and not necessarily Jewish in essence. The subject (matter) could be of a vague, Jewish affiliation like for instance; 'The Jewish Bride' by Rembrandt. The 'bride' represented may have been indeed Jewish but the ritual depicted has little factual understanding of the Jewish marriage ritual. Or, it could be very specific as in 'A Jewish Wedding' by Wincenty Smokowski, which is pure pictorial 'journalistic' reportage in an ethnographic sense of one aspect of the Jewish wedding ritual at a certain time in history and within a specific cultural context, namely Eastern Europe. In either case, the subject matter alone gives only a very limited understanding of the 'Jewishness' of the subject.

I regard such examples of Jewish subject matter shallow and inadequate in terms of describing the artwork as being in the category of a Jewish Art, notwithstanding that some people may find a kind of Jewishness in these images. Interestingly enough neither of these artists were Jewish.

The second quality – created by a Jewish artist automatically presumes that everything a 'Jewish artist' produces could be categorised as Jewish Art, which need not necessarily be the case. With our current (limited) knowledge of (cultural) genetics such a proposition is absurd, because it presumes that through some genetically specific process a Jewish artist imbues everything s/he produces with Jewishness by the mere fact that they created it, even if the particular creation may be of a non-Jewish content. And, of course there is no evidence to prove that this is true. The other problem, of course would arise with the convert to Judaism – at which point would that artist absorb the Jewish cultural gene? There are of course mystical explanations that would place the convert on the same spiritual level (if not higher) than a person born a Jew which would level the playing field somewhat, but the problem persists.

I fully appreciate the range of arguments which suggest that such Jewish, culturally and genetically inspired art is non-existent (yet) and even chauvinistic in aspiration (although it doesn't need to be that), none the less similar arguments were (and continue to be) employed in describing other culturally and ethnically specific art like for example: Australian Aboriginal, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, French, just to

name a few. In some cases such a claim is made for purely political purposes and in others it refers to a type of 'quality' or sensibility that can be defined by the use of colour, line, contrast, light or other elements that have become synonymous with that culture or more specifically, with that culture at a certain time in history.

A necessary caveat:

However, if at some future time it may be discovered, proven and described that there is scientific proof of a 'Jewish sensibility' (genetically or otherwise acquired) as different to other cultural sensibilities, then this type of classification will be important, in fact it could be central to the definition of Jewish Art. If such a sensibility will ever be discovered/defined (and I hope it will be, because I believe it exists), it will help explain the thus far unexplainable qualities in art that 'speak' to the Jewish 'soul' or engage the Jewish 'emotion' or contain a sense of Jewish feel. This undefined Jewish sensibility could be perhaps in the quality of light or the particular emotive quality of the narrative, or the very specific sense of 'otherness', suffering and persecution, or a sense of urban disquiet, or a particular type of rendering, or even perhaps a specific sense/quality of form and colour or spatial orientation, etc. But until such time when a Jewish sensibility will be discovered or proven, or until certain, particular qualities of depiction will be defined as being specifically Jewish, both of the above descriptions are inadequate to describe Jewish Art today. The first being limited by its shallowness, the second by its ironical (perhaps absurdist) wish fulfilment.

This type of Jewishly descriptive subject matter doesn't contribute very much to our understanding of Jewish Art.

So the obvious question arises - *What is Jewish about Jewish Art?*

In order for the Art to be Jewish, it has to contain Jewish content. Subject matter alone may, in some circumstances align the artwork with Jewish Art as a marginal work but by itself it is not really enough. My (personal) answer to this question is always that - any Jewish Art must evoke, express, narrate, explore, celebrate something specifically Jewish and more importantly – from a Jewish perspective – the Jewish 'world view' if you like!

Now here is yet another 'can of worms' – what is Jewish world view? I'll leave that for another essay.

An example of Jewish content would be my Images of Tanya series of prints. Each title describes both subject and content at the same time. For instance, the subject of the specific print - chapter 4 (of the 2nd Book of Tanya) - and the content of that subject - Gate of Unity and Belief. Here subject (matter) describes content and the uniqueness of the content makes this work Jewish. Like with any art, the viewer would need to possess a certain amount of information in approaching this work, specifically s/he would need to appreciate the content of the Book of Tanya upon which this work is based, in order to understand the meaning of the Gate of Unity and Belief. However, this work remains Jewish even if the viewer would not have such information at hand. The colour, shape and in this case the Hebrew alphabet (perhaps) would be sufficient entry points.



Of course it would be comforting to include in the canon of Jewish Art such works by Jewish artists as Moritz Oppenheimer's 'Lavater and Lessing Visit Mendelssohn' or R. B. Kitaj's 'The Jewish Traveller', or Pissarro's 'The Boulevard Montmartre At Night' amongst others but there is nothing entrancingly Jewish about these painting. These subjects could have been painted by non Jewish artists equally successfully, as they don't suggest, express or evoke anything Jewish beyond the title of the painting and the fact that the artists were Jewish, however distant some of them may have felt from Judaism. The content of these paintings stays at the level of describing the particular subject matter in question. The fact that the artists happen to be Jewish doesn't enlighten our understanding or appreciation of these paintings to any greater extent.

On the other hand paintings like Chagall's 'White Crucifixion' or Barnett Newman's 'Onement' imply a content that forces the viewer to question, explore and decipher the meaning contained within or about the subject matter of each of these paintings. The subject matter here is simply a pointer to a deeper meaning, well beyond the subject matter alone. The deeper meaning in each case (here) would lead the viewer to an understanding of an aspect of Judaism that the description of the subject matter alone could not. In Chagall's case, he takes a centrally Christian subject and gives it a Jewish context, inverting the usual understanding of the subject of the Crucifixion by representing Christ as the archetypal, suffering Jew. He inverts the Christian content usually associated with this subject and provokes a Jewish reading by representing Jesus as a Jew and moreover as the archetypal Jew crucified by the Christian oppression and anti-Semitism in the context of the Shtetl as the ultimate other. By this inversion Chagall provokes a political/cultural and spiritual reading of the subject from a Jewish perspective, rather than from a Christian one. In Newman's case, he takes the central tenet of Judaism – the singularity of the Divine and presents it as a pictorial 'symbol'. A truly Jewish aniconic icon type of representation. These paintings contain Jewish meaning and content that distinguishes them as specifically Jewish – these could not be anything else but Jewish. In my view, having understood their Jewish content, the viewer would appreciate the fact that such content could not be painted by someone who is not Jewish. So in this case the fact that the artists are Jewish is an essential aspect of the creative act, not just descriptive of the ethnicity of the artist.

Subject matter alone can be created by anyone. Content however is dependent upon the artists involvement with and connection to their cultural/religious/ethnic sensibility/world view. It may be possible for an artist to create works about another culture, other than his own but it would be very difficult if not impossible to give it the same cultural/spiritual weight as an artist from that culture could bring out.

In a typically pill-pull manner this begs another immediate 2 questions: *Is there a Jewish content? As well as: What is Jewish content?*

The existence of Jewish content is indisputable. It ranges from Biblical texts to Jewish cultural experiences both religious and secular. Jewish secular content although obvious in literature, poetry, cinema and song (especially in Hebrew and or Yiddish) presents some difficulty when it comes to visual representation. I'm not even certain if a totally secular Jewish visual Art is possible as there is something universal about secularism that beyond the representation of dress or food differences, secular representation becomes generic. Religious distinction on the other hand is unique. In my view anything Jewish, automatically contains a level (no matter how slight) of religious distinction. The Jewish content in Biblical, spiritual or mystical representations is unique in its representations of the Divine and the human (Jewish) connection to it.

It could be argued that the Jewish Biblical/spiritual content was hijacked and eventually appropriated to Christian ideology where for centuries the Torah (Old Testament) stories were depicted from a Christian, religiously superseded perspective and thereby the Jewish content was subverted to suit Christian theology. For centuries Jewish visual representation (voice) was limited to the culturally internal representations; Torah and ark coverings, table cloths, challa covers, Haggadot and very few other

illustrations of religious texts. However, there were no major Jewish 'high art' representations to balance the scales of the Christian ones because there were very few Jewish artists to begin with and Jewish presence in the diasporic culture generally and within artistic guilds was marginalised right up to the Enlightenment period. Since then, a number of Jewish artists (including myself) have been working to restore the Biblical Jewish content back into the broader canon of the global visual Arts.

Jewish content in the visual arts should not be any different to the content found in Jewish Biblical texts. My intention is not to limit Jewish Art to purely Biblical subjects, but I believe (think) that it does contain a similar type of exegesis as such texts. For a start, it should be multi-layered. What you see should never be what you get! There are a number of levels of understanding Torah: Pshat (plain) level is the most basic, literal way of understanding/interpreting, Remez (hint) level suggests other interpretations, Drush (homily) level interprets through metaphoric, symbolic or comparative interpretations, Sod (secret) level refers to Kabbalah or other mystical ways of interpretations. There is no reason why a visual Art could not contain a similar depth of content. One may be very satisfied with just (any) one of these levels of content and that would be totally sufficient for a work of art, but a Jewish Art (in my view) should aim at containing as deep a level of content as possible, at least two or more of the above levels described.

It is an accepted artistic reality that the 'visual language' is different to the 'spoken' or 'written' languages as it deals with numerous nuances physical, emotional, unconscious and cultural that are difficult if not impossible to verbalise. These were embedded in the artwork by the artist and often without her/him being conscious of them in the process of creation. One experiences visual art in a very specific non-verbal but visual manner.

My above suggestion of the multi-layered interpretation could easily be experienced in this visual way (non-verbally) as it could be described in words. For example one could begin by looking/appreciating the material of the work of art, the qualities inherent in the use of it by the artist. One could then move onto the imagery or form, contained within the material and appreciate the meaning within it by deciphering it's symbology or metaphors, etc, etc.

There is a particular Jewish, ethical, spiritual and philosophical 'world view' which may or may not align with the political attitude of a specific government or social morays of a particular time, or the fashion of a period. The Jewish world-view is relatively constant while other attitudes wain and wax according to various trends. That is not to say that Judaism is static. It has evolved over time like other religions and cultures. This evolving Jewish world-view comprises another aspect of content that should inform a Jewish Art, even to the point of the Art being 'critical' of it. The more discussion and debate around this issue in Jewish Art the better as it would lead to the necessary evolution of such an Art. Without evolution and development such an Art would stagnate to repetition and eventual death. Just as Judaism itself has evolved (in practice) through the various revelations, texts and levels of understanding, so it should apply equally to a Jewish Art.

There is also a level of content possible to achieve by a deep immersion in the study of Judaism. I'm referring to a deeper, more essential quality that Judaism is about. This can only be reached and achieved by learning, prayer and ritual. This level of Jewish content aims at understanding some Godly qualities. This level of content will lead to levels of mystical representation that secular Judaism cannot comprehend or appreciate.

The above examples of Jewish content are just some possibilities of what informs Jewish Art. A work of art containing any one of these types of content or levels would be sufficient to be described as Jewish Art. Authentic subject matter of Jewish Art is dependent upon the depth of content described above.

Like all great art, Jewish art starts out from a very culturally specific point of birth, but its content has global and universal connotations.

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